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(Sub)merged Worlds in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

This essay explores the (sub)merged worlds depicted in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping* (1980). Applying psychoanalytic conceptualisations of trauma, this essay locates trauma and traumatising in the novel and demonstrates that boundary transgressions, ruination and rupture, and the dark feminine natural world constitute displaced forms of traumatic representation. Drawing on Sigmund Freud's topographical analogy of the psyche as iceberg, this essay reads the depths of *Housekeeping*'s notorious Lake Fingerbone as an underworld; a representation of the unconscious, within which family traumas are buried. Just as Freud reads the visible tip of an iceberg resting above the water's surface as the conscious component of the psyche, my analysis reads Robinson's depiction of the overflowing of Lake Fingerbone and subsequent flooding of its surroundings as an analogue of the penetrative force of trauma which pierces one's consciousness. Following this, I argue that trauma's transgression compels protagonist Ruth Stone to merge worlds, in an attempt to attain coherence and counter the fragmentary effect of trauma. Abandoned and traumatised by the suicide of her mother, Helen, Ruth hungers for maternal reunion, a fatal desire which would involve a return to an unconscious state. This death wish surfaces from her submerged world within: the Freudian id, which contains the death drive and tempts her to succumb to the lake's depths. Finally, I suggest that Helen can be read as a traumatic 'Mother Nature' who embodies and reflects Ruth's traumatised psyche and death wish.

Literary critics have aligned the transgression of boundaries in *Housekeeping* with readings both amenable and antithetical to feminism. Joan Kirkby reads the novel as an exploration of "a rejection of patriarchal values that have dominated American life" (92) while Martha Ravits and Marcia Aldrich assert that the novel subverts oppressive structures and traditions by expressing a suppressed female consciousness. Aldrich contends that the character Sylvie, Ruth's transient aunt, subverts canonical gendered paradigms as she perceives patriarchal abandonment as "enabling" and "a way of life" (130). Siân Mile, however, argues that breached boundaries in the novel signify a resistance to a reclamation of the female body and subjectivity (130-131). In a similar vein, Kristin King asserts that the novel does not reject patriarchal order, but rather it reclaims the symbolic power of the domestic (568). Karen Kaivola's claim that *Housekeeping* is not an "univocally and unproblematically feminist" novel is astute and accurate (670). Although the novel is female-centric in the sense that it focuses predominantly on the relationships, thoughts, memories and actions of its female protagonists, the traumatic death of family patriarch, Edmund Foster, has an enduring and detrimental influence on the psyche and behaviour of his daughter, Sylvie, and granddaughter, Ruth. Indeed, whilst noting that Lake Fingerbone embodies trauma, Christina Caver contends that the novel narrates Ruth's "social death" (113). Commenting on the novel's representation of nature, Kirkby suggests that there is "a sense of

connection with natural life and rhythms, and an erotic rather than manipulative attitude to nature” (98). Although literary critics have acknowledged the novel’s evocation of Thoreauvian considerations of nature, they have tended to overlook the significance of the Freudian female symbolism of *Housekeeping*’s natural world and its implicit link to traumatic representation. My reading of the novel, therefore, seeks to offer a new perspective on the strong female presence in the novel, the natural world and its close relationship to the psychologically transgressive force of trauma.

In spite of Robinson’s explorations and extensive critiques of Freudian conceptions of selfhood in her essay collections *The Death of Adam* (1998) and *Absence of Mind* (2010), and her assertion that “Freud can be seen as offering another framework of understanding that excludes race and nation as essential elements of human nature” there have been scant Freudian readings of her novels and, in particular, *Housekeeping* (*Absence of Mind* 88). Whilst several critics, among them Caver and Lauren Callanan, have commented that Ruth is traumatised, traumatic representation in the novel remains largely unexplored. In a broader sense, however, the narrativisation of trauma in fiction has sparked much critical debate as the traumatic experience, according to trauma theorist Bessel Van der Kolk, “cannot be organised on a linguistic level” (172). Authors and critics have typically responded to this predicament through the use of “experimental, (post)modernist textual strategies” such as, disjointed temporalities or non-linear chronologies, repetition, and shifts in narrative voice (Craps and Buelens 5). According to Alan Gibbs these techniques comprise a specific (but often prescriptive and conventional) trauma aesthetic (27). Rather than adhere strictly to the conventions of a narrow trauma aesthetic which relies on disruptive formal techniques, Robinson broadens narrow models of trauma representation through her use of particular linguistic patterns, images, analogies and allusions in relation to nature. This essay, therefore, seeks to build on extant scholarship and offer an original contribution to the critical conversation by undertaking a detailed and attentive examination of the novel in relation to trauma theory, Freudian considerations of the psyche, and Robinson’s representation of the natural world.

Primarily, it is necessary to explicate trauma and traumatised in order to explore its representation in *Housekeeping*. Derived from the Greek *trauma* or ‘wound’, trauma is primarily a psychological transgression which pierces the barrier between consciousness and unconsciousness (Caruth 3). Freud writes:

We describe as traumatic any excitations [...] which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield. It seems to me that the concept of trauma necessarily implies a connection of this kind with a breach in an otherwise effacious barrier against stimuli. (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 23)

This “protective shield” is the border of consciousness “between outside and inside,” which is penetrated by the traumatic event (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 18). As the traumatic experience is lodged in the unconscious and “cannot be easily translated into the symbolic language

necessary for linguistic retrieval” it challenges and relativises the claims of the symbolic order to totalise and control (Van der Kolk 173). Trauma theorists Van der Kolk and Onno Van der Hart note that “when people are exposed to trauma, i.e. a frightening event outside of ordinary human experience, they experience ‘speechless terror’” (442-443). This speechless terror defines trauma theorist Judith Herman’s “central dialectic of psychological trauma” or “freeze response”; apparent in the ways traumatised individuals oscillate between “feeling numb and reliving the event” (1). This inflicts a “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud” (1). Impeding linguistic integration and vocalisation, trauma manifests itself through somatic disturbances, hypervigilance, recurring thoughts, relational difficulties and “haunting legacies” (Schwab 1). As a result, the traumatised often occupy a liminal state of existence. Due to their psychological and discursive disconnection, they are often viewed as erratic, silenced, and enigmatic. As such, they are often marginalised and excluded from communities whose *modus operandi* is adherence to conventions. The idea that trauma is characterised by a temporary or permanent latency period of amnesia, during which the source of the traumatic experience is unavailable to the victim’s memory, derives from the work of Freud and his notion of *Nachträglichkeit*. Cathy Caruth describes the belatedness that characterises trauma as “the successive movement from an event to its repression to its return” (7). In sum, trauma is a psychological breach and although the traumatic experience is locked in the unconscious, its impact recurs belatedly and impinges on consciousness, often silencing or haunting the victim.

Prior to illustrating traumatic representation, it is necessary to establish the grounds for a trauma-centred interpretation of *Housekeeping*. The death of Ruth’s grandfather, Edmund, and her mother Helen’s abandonment and subsequent suicide, are traumatic events whose ramifications reverberate throughout the generations of the Foster family. As the traumatic event crosses the borderline between the unconscious and conscious, the train on which Edmund is aboard crosses the surface of Lake Fingerbone and plummets to its murky depths. His family’s ensuing psychological and linguistic numbness illustrates Van der Kolk’s and Van der Hart’s observation of the “speechless terror” that permeates the traumatised. In an imagined episode, Ruth usurps her grandmother’s consciousness, asserting that her daughters “were quiet [...] because the habits of their lives had almost relieved them of the need for speech [...] This perfect quiet had settled into their house after the death of their father” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 15). Edmund’s traumatic death emotionally desensitises and silences his family. Their seeming freedom “from the troublesome possibility of success, recognition, advancement” is a description not of peacefulness but of trauma-induced paralysis, of a family unable to speak of trauma until, finally, they barely speak at all (13). Although trauma is “outside of ordinary human existence,” it entails a “resurrection of the ordinary” as the Foster family seek refuge in the ordinary world of routine and repetition in an attempt to repair their trauma-induced psychological rupture (15). Ruth’s grandmother models the novel’s most literal form of housekeeping as she works to

shield her children from adversity and contingency. The repetitiveness of her housekeeping efforts (washing, making beds, flower arranging) is as alarming as it is reassuring as it induces a disquieting sense of unease. Her entrapment and seclusion is indicative of her psychological paralysis which her repetitive rituals aim to counter. In characteristic traumatic temporality, history recurs when Helen dies. The silence and secrecy which strangles the Fosters is perpetuated as Ruth describes how her grandmother “spent a number of days in her bedroom” (121). She cares for Ruth and Lucille in the same way that she cared for her own daughters in the wake of their father’s death, but now in a troubled mix of trepidation and loss. Ruth recalls how her grandmother “cared for her like someone reliving a long day dream” as she repeatedly

whited shoes and braided hair and fried chicken and turned back bedclothes, and then suddenly feared and remembered that the children had somehow disappeared, every one. How had it happened? How might she have known? And she whited shoes and braided hair [...] as if re-enacting the commonplace would make it merely commonplace again. (24-25)

Robinson’s use of polysyndeton positions Mrs Foster’s housekeeping tasks as laborious and interminable, needing to be repeated daily, weekly, with each generation and each traumatic or inexplicable loss. The questions interrupting those recurrent activities are harrowing—“How had it happened? How might she have known?”—suggesting that housekeeping has not done its restorative work as Mrs Foster still “suddenly fear[s]” the unexpected, and indeed traumatic, repeated separation of mother and daughter. Against that chilling realisation, she fervently returns to her domestic rituals to wrestle control from chaos. The very confusion of this passage, however, speaks to the futility of her efforts. The recurring questions which torment Mrs Foster resemble the return of the repressed traumatic experience which fragments thoughts and temporal order with its intrusion.

Much of Mrs Foster’s housekeeping is cleaning, an activity of restoring order. Mary Douglas’s conceptualisation of dirt as “matter out of place” can be applied to Robinson’s depiction of housekeeping in relation to boundaries and thresholds (36). Douglas writes:

I believe that ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created. (4)

Mrs Foster subscribes to this form of housekeeping which has its corollary in the maintenance of the house, and ultimately, the self. As the traumatic experience pierces the psychic barrier between inside and outside, reparation of the fragmented psyche requires a “keeping” of subjective boundaries. Sylvie, however, subverts her mother’s style of housekeeping by redefining it as an activity which maintains permeable boundaries between self and other, and inside and outside. Sylvie has become accustomed to “house-leaving” due to the traumatic deaths of her father and sister, and her own subsequent transience. Her literal state of dispossession can be read as a reflection of her trauma-induced psychological dispossession; she is not self-possessed, but rather possessed by the haunting ghosts of

her past. In her attempts to resist house-leaving, dispossession and abandonment, Sylvie mistakes accumulation and possession for housekeeping. She understands the connection of housekeeping to the accrual of property, but not to the processes of sorting and excluding. The floor and sofa become littered with the dismembered remains of birds brought in by “thirteen or fourteen” cats, indicating the pervasion of death and decay, and the confusion of the boundaries between outside and the inside (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 182). This is indicative of her need, or compulsion, to merge and immerse rather than separate. As the parlour is filled with old newspapers and cans, it is allied with the more private, marginal spaces of the house generally used for storage such as the basement or attic. Sylvie’s refusal to dispose of dead or rotting items suggests her inability to order or dispose of the traumatic memory of her familial deaths. In the same way that the parlour is akin to a basement cluttered with waste material, Sylvie’s belated, traumatic memories are unsorted clutter or disordered out-of-date materials which remain repressed in the figurative basement of her unconscious. Rather than domesticating her traumatic experiences or assimilating them into a familiar structure or a coherent order, Sylvie’s style of housekeeping retains her trauma and reinforces her psychological dispossession.

Although Ruth’s narrative is not composed of the fragmented language and disjointed syntax characteristic of conventional trauma narratives, it does not indicate that Ruth is not traumatised. Although the extent of her trauma is not clear, she does display the symptoms of trauma outlined by trauma theorists. Rather than portraying Ruth’s trauma through adherence to the paradigmatic trauma aesthetic, Robinson positions Ruth as trapped in Herman’s “dialectic of trauma” (1). Although Ruth does not vocalise the negative effect that her mother’s death has had on her, it is implied in her eloquent narrative as she repeatedly envisages scenarios of death by drowning. Ruth’s numbness regarding her mother’s suicide is evident from its omission from her account of her family history. Listing only those who abandoned her, she states:

My name is Ruth. I grew up with my younger sister, Lucille, under the care of my grandmother, Mrs. Sylvia Foster, and when she died, of her sisters-in-law, Misses Lily and Nona Foster, and when they fled, of her daughter, Mrs. Sylvia Fisher. (3)

In the same way that the traumatic experience recurs belatedly, it is not until later that the reader discovers that the most traumatic and violent abandonment of all, the suicide of Ruth’s mother Helen, is not listed. Although Ruth initially represses her mother’s suicide, her mother impinges on her consciousness as “the woman in the mirror, the woman in the dream, the woman remembered” (131-132). Although her imaginative landscape is dominated by these haunting, repetitive images of her absent/present mother, only the reader has access to them. To those around her within the novel she barely speaks at all. Ruth is haunted by her mother’s death to the extent that she embodies the walking dead as her sister, Lucille, brands her a “zombie” (127). Both Sylvie, Helen’s erratic sister, and Ruth exemplify Schwab’s contention that the traumatised have “relational difficulties” due to their discursive and emotional debilitation. Sylvie is transient whilst Ruth admits, “I had never made a friend in my

life” (130). Caver argues that by the end of the novel, Ruth has an “ontologically uncertain status – socially, if not literally, dead” (133). As the assertion lacks textual evidence, I cannot conclude that Ruth is literally dead but she does occupy a liminal space as a traumatised victim. Although their familial traumas are repressed, they form an unspeakable absent presence at the centre of the lives of Ruth and Sylvie.

Freud introduced a topographical model of the mind using the analogy of an iceberg (quoted in Pastorino and Doyle-Portillo 462). He holds that the part of the iceberg submerged under water represents the unconscious component of the human psyche. Using Freud’s analogy, Robinson’s lake can be read as the metaphorical embodiment of the unconscious. Just as the traumatic event is buried in the unconscious, the suppressed transgenerational traumas of the Foster and Stone families are buried beneath the lake’s surface. Similarly, Henry David Thoreau noted that “the long lost bottom of Walden pond” (549) was the medium through which “the beholder measures the depth of his own nature” (471). As Robinson’s lake literally harbours Ruth’s family’s remains and figuratively beholds trauma, it figures the depths of Ruth’s unconsciousness. Ruth’s contention that “Shock will spend itself like waves” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 93) is apt as the noun “shock” resonates with “shell shock,” a precursor to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Moreover, as Ruth’s simile interlaces shock and waves, it reinforces the view that trauma wanders adrift through the waves of a water world. Ruth describes the old lake, “the foundation” of Lake Fingerbone, as “nameless and altogether black” (9). As it is unnameable, it mirrors the unspoken traumas at “the foundation” of Ruth’s family. Unnamed, the lake is reduced to a thing. Subsequently, it invokes the Freudian Thing, “which is other and therefore unrepresentable” (Belville 191). As such, it reflects the traumatic experience which thwarts symbolisation. Combined with its absolute “blackness,” the lake is an oblique and ominous abyss brimming with “giant miseries” and trauma (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 63). Paralleling the traumatic experience which repeatedly intrudes, the old lake “return[s] in spring” (5). Subsequently, the lake is a literal underworld and spatial-temporal manifestation of traumatic experience locked in the unconscious.

The world which constitutes Ruth’s “other world” is the world of rigid regulations (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 123). Informed by Freud’s topographical model, it is the conscious component of the psyche analogous with the visible tip of the iceberg resting above the water’s surface. Ruth observes how “fragments of transparent ice knitted themselves up like bits of a reflection” on the surface of the lake (7). In an inversion of Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage, which describes the perception of a visual mirror image of wholeness of self, Ruth’s “fragmented” and “bitty” reflection on the lake’s surface conveys her splintered consciousness. Her frozen reflection mirrors her freeze response to trauma. Moreover, it is significant that ice is the material which comprises her consciousness. As the ice is a sharp, perforated form of the watery waves of trauma, it implies that the traumatic deaths of Ruth’s mother and grandfather pierce her consciousness. Furthermore, her use of the verb knitted is

fitting. Just as knitting, a traditionally domestic practice, entwines disparate threads to create coherence, Ruth's grandmother turns to housekeeping in an effort to repair the domestic bubble which trauma has burst. Similarly, Ruth attempts to knit together a coherent narrative of events from traumatic memories.

Ruth recognises that "Lucille's loyalties were with the other world" (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 82). Although Rinda West argues that Ruth is "our ego" (112), I would argue that Lucille beholds and exhibits characteristics of the conscious ego. Smith notes that the ego is "turned toward the light" (94), thus, it is appropriate that Lucille's name is derived from the Latin *lux*, meaning light (Shipley 222). She is a denizen of brightness in contrast to Sylvie and Ruth who prefer to dwell in darkness. Lucille is particularly conscious of her ego-ideal, the "guarantor of ambition" (Grotstein 189) as she repeatedly insists "we have to improve ourselves!" (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 123). Like the ego which functions as a mediator between the unconscious and conscious, Lucille seeks to re-establish the physical and psychological boundaries which trauma defies. She reacts to Sylvie's transgressions of social proprieties by engaging in flurries of fierce housecleaning. Long after Ruth has left Fingerbone, she imagines Lucille, like her grandmother, "in a fury of righteousness, cleansing and polishing, all these years" to "stalemate the forces of ruin" (186). Ultimately, housekeeping is a symbolic purification rite which aims to counter the psychological polluting force of trauma and whitewash the darkness it paints on the psyche.

As it is above the lake's surface, the all-female Foster household with its absence of paternal authority is an emblem of female consciousness. The submerged unconscious underworld and the female conscious world merge as the lake overflows and drenches the household. Just as trauma ruptures the psychic border, the water crosses the lake's surface or, using Freud's analogy, the metaphorical borderline of consciousness. Ruth asserts, "the fragility of our household was by now so great that the breach was inevitable" (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 188). Ruth's rhetoric also recalls Freud's use of "breach" to refer to the rupture trauma inflicts. The household's gradual descent into disintegration represents the destructive force of trauma which fragments the family's fragile consciousness. The trauma-filled water's power is so potent that Ruth recalls how the Foster home "flowed around us" (64). Upon surveying the damage of the home, Ruth becomes fixated on soaked curtains noticing that the "pantry curtain rod was deeply bowed by the weight of the water climbing up the curtains" (62) and how the "lace curtains, [were] drawn thin and taut" (64). As curtains usually function as barriers, their saturation demonstrates that the water, like trauma, resists boundaries. As a pantry stores familiar supplies, it can be read as the psychical storeroom of cognised conscious perceptual experiences. Therefore, the water's infiltration and subsequent lingering in "the depths of the pantry" (69) represents the traumatic experience which cannot be absorbed into pre-existing cognitive frameworks.



A household usually epitomises the canny, the “homey” and “familiar” but, concurrent with Freud’s contention that the uncanny is a response to trauma, the Foster household becomes uncanny; “unhomey” and “strange” following trauma’s intrusion (Linville 114). As the water all but drowns the house, Helen’s traumatic death by drowning is figuratively repeated, and in turn, the pervasive effect it has on Ruth’s consciousness. Ruth’s recollection of Lucille poking at a “sofa cushion” awash with “suppurated water” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 64), recalls her visualisation of the retrieval of a “seat cushion” (6) from the immersed train wreckage on which her dead grandfather, Edmund, was aboard. Ruth’s fixation, therefore, reveals how transhistorical traumas have trickled into her consciousness and filtered her perceptions. Lee Mitchell writes that “traumatised Ruth [is] a figurative transient of her own past” (163). Ruth’s reflections culminate in a rhetorical question – “What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?” – which is in itself an assertion of belief rooted in loss and longing (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 92). In this way, Ruth’s psychological development mirrors that described by Herman who asserts that the “old beliefs that gave meaning to life have been challenged: now she must find anew a sustaining faith” (196). The knitting up of fragments constitutes a psychological form of housekeeping which Ruth uses to knit up the fragments of her self to craft a coherent whole, and to restore caninness or homeliness. However, this idyllic vision is a fantasy driven by denial and predicated upon unresolved and unintegrated trauma.

Ruth’s belief that “longing [...] fosters us [...] and brings us wild strawberries” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 153) demonstrates how Helen seeps into Ruth’s perceptions. Ruth’s use of the verb foster is a double entendre as Sylvie’s surname is Foster. As Sylvie is the foster who fosters Ruth and Lucille it is implied that Ruth sees Sylvie as a quasi-reincarnation of her mother. Sylvie’s gifts of “wild strawberries” recall Ruth’s visualisation of her mother “gazing at the lake eating wild strawberries” prior to killing herself (23). The connection between Helen on the brink of death and Sylvie is further reinforced by Ruth’s recollection that the last time she saw her mother she was given graham crackers (20). Significantly, Sylvie also gives graham crackers to Ruth (174). Ruth’s recollection of her mother’s and Sylvie’s provision of food implies that she craves the maternal nourishment of which her mother’s death deprived her. Ruth believes that Sylvie “could as well be my mother. I crept in her very shape like an unborn child” (146). The longing that Sylvie embodies, therefore, is Ruth’s desire to return to the maternal. This is apparent from the cave-like structure Ruth constructs and temporarily inhabits. The dwelling is physically and figuratively comparable to her mother’s womb. She recalls, “We used a big stone in its side as one wall [...] We had to sit with our chins on our knees” (114). The stone foundations, from which this womb-like cavern is constructed, invoke the cornerstone of Ruth’s being, that is, her mother, Helen. Furthermore, Ruth’s and Lucille’s postures in the cave mirror those of two fetuses in the womb. Ruth adds, “Lucille crawled out and began writing her name in pebbles on the sand” (114). Lucille’s crawl re-enacts the departure from the womb. As language grounds the subject in the symbolic order, Lucille’s act of writing her name is an

attempt to reassert her own discrete subjectivity, distinct from the maternal body. Unlike Lucille, Ruth stays in the cave which indicates that she prefers attachment to the maternal body where the boundaries between self and other do not yet exist.

Ruth observes that the imagined ghostly children's "eyes were gone and their feet broken" (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 159, emphasis added). The missing body parts can be retrieved in Lake Fingerbone as Ruth imagines that "The eye of the lake is my grandfather's" whilst the water "composed my mother's limbs" (194, emphasis added). Ruth's description reveals her belief that the lake offers resolution and completion. Whilst traversing the "bitter" lake with Sylvie, Ruth reasons that her "grandfather had brought us here" (149). In tracing their pull to the "darker world" of the lake back to their grandfather, a pattern of repetition emerges. Edmund was aboard the train that slid into the lake and Helen emulated the train's ruination when she plunged her car into the lake. Now Ruth is with Sylvie in a boat whose "oars set off vortices" which could "draw [them] down into the darker world" (150). Their return to the corpse-hoarding lake echoes Freud's observation that traumatised children have a compulsion to repeat "unpleasurable experiences" and reaffirms the existence of a death drive; that is, an instinct to return to the "primeval inorganic state" which lurks in the id or the unconscious component of the psyche (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 119). Ruth's submerged world within, the Freudian id, entices her to surrender her consciousness to the literal submerged underworld as she muses, "the only true birth would be a final one, which would free us from watery darkness and the thought of watery darkness" (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 162). Therefore, Ruth's quotation of the biblical phrase "The stone that seals their tomb" (13) is particularly apt as the lake is tomblike as the remains of the dead wither and wander through it. Significantly, Ruth's mother, Helen "seals" her to the lake. As a seal joins two things together, Helen Stone and her traumatic death seal Ruth's toxic attraction to the lake.

Freud classifies orchards, woods, and water, the focal natural landscapes in the novel, as female symbols (*General Introduction* n.pag.). Ruth notes that the pond in the orchard covers "grass and black leaves and fallen branches, all around it black leaves and drenched grass and fallen branches" (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 5). The juxtaposition of the orchard and water with the black ruins of nature and the collapsed phallic-branch of paternal authority links the natural world to femininity and death. Ruth's repeated iterations of "leaves" and "grass" chime with Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Leaves are a recurring motif in the novel and resonate with Whitman's depiction of the leaves as a "knit of identity" (27). As noted above, Ruth also repeatedly uses the verb knit throughout her narrative. Read alongside Whitman's metaphor, the identity Robinson's ashen leaves connote is not one of blossoming youth but of death and decay. If these leaves constitute a knit of identity, the identity holder is most likely to be Helen as the dead leaves are submerged under the pond's water. Thus, by extension, Helen's identity is embedded in nature. In addition, the leaves carry the intrusive force of trauma as they "gather in the corners" of the Foster household (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 84-85). Furthermore, Ruth states that

when Helen abandoned her family, “sorrow was released [...] sorrow is a predatory thing” (198). The thread which connects Helen’s death, Ruth’s ensuing sorrow and sorrow’s animalistic nature is Lake Fingerbone. Earlier in her narrative, Ruth portrays the lake as predatory for it is “sharp as the breath of an animal” (9). Furthermore, as alluded to above, the lake is akin to an unnamed thing which chimes with Ruth’s description of sorrow as a “predatory thing.” Robinson’s merging of Helen’s traumatic death with the natural world repositions Helen as a dispersed and traumatic Mother Nature.

Ruth and Lucille’s experience of their sojourn in nature is not of the exalted mood of Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson’s or Thoreau’s nature writing, but of a sensibility that resembles the Kantian sublime. Immanuel Kant asserts that the feeling of the sublime is accompanied with “dread,” “admiration,” and “beauty” (qtd. in Doran 181). Although Ruth insists that she goes to the “woods for the woods’ own sake” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 99), the nature of her visit is of a morose character. She recalls, “We would walk [...] hearing the enthralled and incessant murmurings far above our heads, like children at a funeral” (98). Although the “unnaturally lengthy and spacious” (79) quality of Ruth and Lucille’s days at the lake may imply a Thoreauvian deliberateness of living, their enhanced consciousness is neither deliberate nor delightful. Instead, it is a perilous pleasure wrung from discomfort. Ruth notes that the “combined effects of cold, tedium, guilt, loneliness, and dread sharpened our senses wonderfully” (79). Her assertion that “every evening would bring its familiar strangeness” (18) captures the peculiar effect of the uncanny. Ruth also conveys this effect stylistically, for instance, she recalls the ferocious force of the water, “wrenching and ramming and slamming and upending” (64). Ruth’s use of polysyndeton conveys the water’s incessant wrecking and ruining and imparts a sense of encroaching terror whilst her rhyme offers comfort. Freud considers the Kantian Sublime to be an analogue of uncanniness; the feeling which trauma educes (Crockett 35). Tinged with tranquillity and terror, the uncanny effect which Robinson’s natural world elicits parallels Ruth’s ambivalent feelings towards her mother. Helen is both dead yet omnipresent and although her death and memory imprison Ruth, Ruth simultaneously longs for maternal nourishment and reunion. Subsequently, Robinson’s uncanny natural world can be read as a representation of Ruth’s trauma and her unconscious deathly desires.

Ruth recalls, “I sat down on the grass [...] I let my skin tighten, and let the chills run in ripples” (Robinson, *Housekeeping* 137). Ruth’s immersive act is evocative of Emerson’s “transparent eyeball” which merges the not-me, nature, and the conscious ‘I’ with God (Greenham 86). Like Emerson’s transparent eyeball, Ruth’s reflection is composed of transparent ice as noted above. In addition, just as the transparent eyeball is grounded in reflection, Ruth becomes the figurative reflection of Helen as Sylvie observes “She’s her mother all over again” (182). As Mother Nature’s offspring, Helen and the trauma entrenched natural world are sewn into the fabric of Ruth’s self. Knit together, the traumatised Ruth therefore mirrors her mother and the dark, trauma-imbued natural world.

In conclusion, this essay has identified and examined elements of trauma and traumatising in *Housekeeping*. The death of her grandfather and her mother's suicide are traumatic experiences which trigger Ruth's entrapment in the dialectic of psychological trauma. Like the sunken train wreckage and ruins, the Foster's and Stone's suppressed family traumas are buried in the lake; the spatial-temporal manifestation of trauma lodged in the unconscious. The wake of Lake Fingerbone's overflowing; the drenched Foster household's fragmentation, destruction, and disintegration; and the shattered shards of ice comprising Ruth's splintered reflection, richly illustrate trauma's penetrative and destructive force. Ruth creates a new form of housekeeping by knitting worlds together to reap (re)unity to counter the trail of trauma's psychical destruction. Ruth's wish to reunite with her mother is deduced from her references to the pre-oedipal stage and her construction and occupation of womb-like structures. Although Ruth wishes to be reunited with her ever-present spectral mother, the lake and dark natural world traced with Helen's touch is both desired and dreaded. Robinson's death-drenched feminine nature casts Helen as a disseminated, ubiquitous, and traumatic Mother Nature and, therefore, the natural world, which permeates the crevices of the household, is representative of Ruth's trauma and her trauma-induced longings. Through her fusion with Mother Nature, Ruth is both self and (m)other. Subsequently, she is a traumatised ghostlike figure and an emblem of the uncanny; the figurative reflection of her dead mother and the uncanny natural world. As a result of her fractured consciousness and subjectivity, the solid boundaries between self and other, and life and death dissolve into fluidity.

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